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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1912
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1777
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2346
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2743

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000995

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: DETERMINING CULTURAL HISTORY IN A
POST-SOVIET COUNTRY

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Cultural identity is illusive in Turkmenistan, due in large part both to Soviet Russification efforts and the inability of Niyazov's Ruhnama to provide a believable and cohesive history. President Berdimuhammedov is beginning to take steps to address the lack of Turkmen history and provide a sense of definition to what it means to be Turkmen. However, with the larger question still outstanding of whether it is possible to develop a credible, unifying history, the president seems to feel the best interim solution is to focus most of his efforts on promoting a modern Turkmenistan prepared to look safely to the future.
END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) Former President Niyazov's "Book of the Soul," the Ruhnama, was the centerpiece of his cult of personality. It consisted of Niyazov's poetry and musings on Turkmen culture and history. It was also forced on the population and given near "scripture" status. Under Niyazov, it became a major part of school curricula, supplanting or reducing traditional subjects like math or science. Almost any government activity had to be linked to a quote from this "sacred text." Government buildings and schools were obliged to maintain and show off their "Ruhnama rooms" -- shrines to the book's "greatness." All government entities had regular, required Ruhnama meetings in order to apply its "wisdom" to their work. Small business owners maintained their own small visible shrines to the Ruhnama, in the hope of avoiding problems with authorities. There were nightly readings from the book on state television. The fact that the Ruhnama became a primary symbol of obedience to an authoritarian leader did not bode well for its general acceptance among the population. However, the recent past and the lack of a major alternative view on Turkmen history or identity means that the book's ideas do carry some significance; and an examination of the book's role is valuable to understanding present-day Turkmenistan.

RUSSIFICATION IGNORED TURKMEN HISTORY

14. (U) During the Soviet era, the version of Turkmen history in the official history books amounted to a brief

description of a nomadic, tribal society that was not unified. Schools primarily educated students on Russian and Soviet history. After the end of the Soviet period, Turkmenistan, which did not actively seek independence, had to find a way to restore its history and discover some way of describing what it meant to be a Turkmen. The Turkmen people did not know their own history.

NIYAZOV'S RUHNAME TRIED AND FAILED TO PROVIDE A NATIONAL HISTORY

15. (U) After independence, the Ruhnama was former President Niyazov's attempt to bring culture and history back to Turkmenistan. The Ruhnama was originally meant to provide a starting point to describe what it meant to be Turkmen and to provide context for the history of Turkmenistan in the post-Soviet era. Rather than being the starting point for the building of a new Turkmen identity, the Ruhnama became the basis of Niyazov's cult of personality. It also was a tool for promoting the president's vision of a unified identity, rather than one steeped in tribal factionalism. As such, it quickly became the only acceptable history of the Turkmen people. And many Turkmen, including local Embassy employees, point to the Ruhnama as the only source for information on Turkmen history, even if significant parts of it are inaccurate. There were no other volumes available for study.

16. (SBU) As a result, for many citizens, official Turkmen history starts at the Ruhnama. Many younger Turkmen look blankly at anyone who asks about what type of history they

ASHGABAT 00000995 002 OF 003

were taught. Although they often express doubt about the tome's accuracy, they have no other source of historic information to which to compare it. There are those who, while acknowledging that the book has flaws, are extremely defensive of it as a history of Turkmenistan and symbol of the Turkmen identity. But because of the book's one-sided focus, it still does not offer a full sense of what that identity is. Some older citizens mention some oral traditions and passing down family history. Some Turkmen tend to identify most with the book's focus on lack of rebellion on the part of the Turkmen people (which Niyazov emphasized for his own purposes). One employee said that the only time that Turkmen revolt is when the situation is completely unbearable; otherwise they suffer and continue to move on.

LOCAL LEGENDS ARE NOT REFLECTED IN NATIONAL HISTORIES

17. (SBU) Although not referenced in official Turkmen histories, there is a rich story-telling tradition with beautiful and often tragic legends that are recounted at many historical sites, some outlining the times past of the particular area. Often, however, such tales are not viewed as an "official" part of Turkmen history or as something that should be passed down. But these stories and sites are also viewed as "ancient," and there has been little or no effort to connect them to modern Turkmen citizens or modern identity.

THE EFFECT ON NATIONAL IDENTITY

18. (SBU) The Ruhnama does not seem to have created a lasting or even real national identity. The current government's apparent phasing out of the Ruhnama and the lack of a coherent history has left a massive gap in Turkmen's cultural identification. When asked what it means to be Turkmen, some citizens -- not sure how to respond -- usually talk about family ties and hometowns or areas. Almost never do they reference national events, dress, or other cultural or national identity. One local employee said that the Ruhnama and Niyazov will be forgotten by history or referenced as a tragedy due to his impact on the education system and the creation of a "lost generation" who will have

few practical skills to offer Turkmenistan.

THE NEW PRESIDENT TRIES TO BRING HISTORY TO THE PEOPLE

19. (SBU) How to teach a coherent and proud Turkmen history remains elusive. During the last year and a half, President Berdimuhammedov has instituted educational conferences that seem to be trying to bring some sense of history and tradition back to Turkmenistan, and define what it means to be Turkmen. For example, the second conference, which occurred this summer, was on the famous Turkmen poet Magtumguly, who is widely acknowledged as the most influential of Turkmen poets. The president seems to be hoping that this focus on Turkmen culture and society will influence development of a new movement into examining Turkmen history and focusing on comprehensive histories and events that will actually unite the Turkmen people. There is also a slow reemergence of histories that were written during Glasnost in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Niyazov refused to acknowledge two fairly comprehensive histories of Turkmenistan, but an EmbOff noted that they are starting to slowly reemerge in certain circles, especially as the Ruhnama begins to fade from sight.

110. (SBU) COMMENT: Perhaps because of its exclusive, highly selective focus, Niyazov's artificial history alienated older generations and failed to give enough of a base to newer generations to provide a cohesive Turkmen history. The question of what exactly is Turkmenistan's history still remains to be answered. Nevertheless, Berdimuhammedov's initial stabs at rehabilitating this issue seem to be more

ASHGABAT 00000995 003 OF 003

credible than his predecessor's efforts. It will be interesting to see how the president's efforts to develop the past turn out and what other history books emerge in the next few years. However, with the larger question still outstanding of whether it is possible to develop a credible, unifying history, the president seems to feel the best interim solution is to focus most of his efforts on promoting a modern Turkmenistan prepared to look safely to the future.
END COMMENT.
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